

Suction dredge miners restake their claims

At rally in Riggins, suction dredgers say they'll continue to violate EPA rules they disagree with

Tribune/Joel Mills

Miners restake their claims

Idaho state Rep. Paul Shepherd addresses a crowd of about 60 people at a rally Friday in Riggins supporting suction-dredge mining on Idaho waterways without having to secure permits from the Environmental Protection Agency.

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[Suction dredge miners restake their claims](#) By JOEL MILLS of the Tribune The Lewiston Tribune | [6 comments](#)

RIGGINS - John Crossman takes offense when someone refers to his livelihood as "recreational" mining.

"This is my life," the Boise resident said at the Friday rally he organized to protest new Environmental Protection Agency regulations. "This is what I do all summer to pay my bills. We're going to keep going. The state says I can."

About 60 operators of small-scale mining dredges and their supporters gathered at Riggins City Park to protest new regulations that effectively ban dredging in many of Idaho's river basins, including the Salmon and Clearwater. They have been mining all week on the Salmon River in violation of the regulations, but no one had been cited as of Friday, Crossman said.

Idaho issues its own permits for suction dredging, but last year the EPA began requiring miners to obtain a National Pollution Discharge Elimination System permit, which isn't available on many streams that are home to threatened fish species. But Crossman said the miners utilize river sections that are mere conduits for fish to reach their spawning grounds, and not the spawning grounds themselves.

And miners aren't introducing any pollution into the water, just sucking up material from the river bottom, sluicing it, and putting it back in.

Several miners also said they are actually improving the environment with their activities by removing toxic metals from the water, and cleaning up all the trash and lost fishing lures they find.

"All the lead stays in my box, and all the mercury stays in my box," Crossman said.

Riggins dredger Alan Trees said he has accumulated more than 400 pounds of mercury over the years, almost all of it from Idaho waterways. He keeps it in his shop, and is working with the state to dispose of it.

Idaho County Commissioner Jim Chmelik held up a green plastic gold pan full of discarded cans, bottles and paper to represent the trash he said miners always pick up when they are working the rivers. He called out the Idaho Conservation League, Idaho Rivers United, and Friends of the Clearwater for environmental activities he said are restricting the miners' ability to make a living.

"What is your guys' problem?" Chmelik said. "Because what these guys do here is take care of the environment. Dredges don't kill fish. Fishermen kill fish. So let's get the facts straight."

Sen. Sheryl Nuxoll, R-Cottonwood, and Rep. Paul Shepherd, R-Riggins, also spoke at the rally in support of the miners. Shepherd said he is working on two pieces of legislation that could help their cause. The first is a law to nullify the EPA regulations.

Republican Idaho lawmakers have unsuccessfully pursued nullification of federal laws in the past, but Shepherd said the nullification of regulations enacted by a federal agency may be possible. He is seeking legal advice from Meridian attorney Christ Troupis, who recently failed in his primary challenge of Idaho Attorney General Lawrence Wasden.

The other legislation would give official state recognition to suction dredging as a vocation, not just a recreational activity.

Nuxoll equated the protest to a spiritual battle over the right to job satisfaction and financial security, and the right of people to profit from the earth.

"It's the right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, which really is the right to pursue property," she said.

Crossman said almost 100 people stayed at the miners' camp this week, and most will leave Sunday. But he will dredge all summer, and hope he gets the EPA attention that will ultimately put the matter before a judge.

"Cite me, please, come cite me," he said. "All of us want to get cited, because then there's going to be a lawsuit, and we're going to win. And then we can get rid of this crap."

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